

John W. Keys, III: A Tribute to Leadership

By John Redding, PN Region Acting Public Affairs Officer

Those who knew him best came together to pay tribute to a man who was by contrast notoriously modest, yet a leader who stood larger than life as the head of the Bureau of Reclamation.

The man, his memory, and his legacy were on full display as family, friends and colleagues celebrated the official dedication of the newly named “John W. Keys, III Pump-Generating Plant” at Grand Coulee Dam.

Guests and dignitaries gathered together inside the Grand Coulee Visitor Arrival Center located just downstream from the dam and the pump-generating plant to recall the man whose personal style and leadership touched so many people.

The May 12, 2009, event honoring John Keys focused on his life, his service, and his unique personal touch as a man who came up through the ranks to eventually serve as Commissioner of Reclamation from 2001 until his retirement in 2006.

Mrs. Dell Keys and her daughter, Robin Fisher, were the guests of honor as they listened to speakers from various parts of the country describe a man that they knew best as a husband and a dad.

Former Commissioner of Reclamation Bob Johnson had a close personal friendship with him that resonated in his message.

“I don't know any that didn't know and appreciate John,” Johnson said. “He had a great sense of humor and he was very loyal. And he's truly, truly, an honorable man and he deserves the honor that we are giving him today.”

Ken Lane Senior Advisor to the Secretary of the Interior, traveled to the event from Washington DC to represent Secretary Ken Salazar and pay tribute to Keys' memory.

“Water issues are rarely glamorous, but water is the life blood of civilization. That is particularly true here in the American West. So in a real sense, today, we honor one of the great stewards of our civilization, John Keys,” Lane said.

The pump-generating plant is an essential part of the infrastructure at Grand Coulee Dam because it provides irrigation water to hundreds of thousands of acres of farmland in the Columbia Basin Project.

Dick Ericksen came to speak on behalf of the Columbia Basin Irrigation Districts served by Project water. He also worked closely with Keys over the years and expressed his views about the man himself.

“He reunited the Reclamation family, Erickson said. “We are all better off today, for John Keys having passed this way. I think it is very fitting for the Grand Coulee pump generating plant that serves irrigation, hydropower, fish, wildlife and recreation be dedicated in John's memory.”

The three districts served by Project water include: Quincy-Columbia Basin Irrigation District, East Columbia Basin Irrigation District, and South Columbia Basin Irrigation District.

Norm Semanko traveled from Boise, Idaho, as a representative of the Family Farm Alliance Advisory Committee. He told the audience that Keys saw the value in each individual.

“It didn’t matter if you were the Secretary of Interior or if you were just the secretary in somebody’s law office,” Semanko said. “He treated everyone the same, everyone’s views were views that needed to be respected, and valued.”

A letter from former Deputy Interior Secretary Lynn Scarlett was read by Kameran Onley who served as Assistant Secretary for Water & Science.

“I’m one of those who’s looking forward to bringing my 18 month old or when she can walk and talk and bring her out to this dam and show her the plaque of John and show her what individuals and communities can do together when they put their heads together to figure out how to tackle some of these really complicated issues,” Scarlett wrote.

Final remarks came from Dell Keys herself who acknowledged her husband's rather low-key nature while also showing appreciation to Reclamation for the honor in recognizing his work.

“Thank you very much, we greatly appreciate this honor, and I’m sure John would too,” Mrs. Keys said. “I think he would be very pleased, he’d be a little embarrassed, in his good old down home Alabama boy way he’d be saying kind of “Oh shucks, you know. I didn’t do anything much, you know...”

She went on to say, “He’d be very grateful, we are very grateful and we sincerely thank you for the honor of naming this pump generating plant after John. Thank you very much.”

David Murillo, Power Manager of Grand Coulee Project, welcomed the guests to the event. Acting Commissioner of Reclamation Bill McDonald served as master of ceremonies and provided introductions of guest speakers throughout the event.

The event concluded with a tour of the newly named “John W. Keys, III Pump-Generating Plant” located adjacent to Lake Roosevelt and Banks Lake.